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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL SOCI KIRF VM RELFREE HUMANR

SUBJECT: HOW NOW HOA HAO? RELIGION IN AN GIANG PROVINCE

REF: A) 02 HCMC 1140 B) HCMC 0210 C) 03 HANOI 01535

1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The leadership of the government-recognized Hoa Hao Administrative Council (HHAC) provided a predictably positive report on the condition of the indigenous Hoa Hao faith in Vietnam, during PolOff's recent visit to An Giang Province. The HHAC, recognized by the GVN in 1999, was well into preparations for its second General Congress and the election of new leaders later this year, despite assertions by "dissident" Hoa Hao leaders unaffiliated with the HHAC that the HHAC was a GVN puppet and the elections would be rigged. PolOff was able to raise the case of imprisoned Hoa Hao follower Nguyen Van Lia with local officials, but was thwarted in his attempt to visit another outspoken Hoa Hao activist. Separate from the Hoa Hao, two other religious groups in An Giang province have started application process for official GVN recognition. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) PolOff traveled to An Giang Province from February 18-20, holding official meetings with: Mr. Nguyen Tan Dat, Vice Chairman of the Hoa Hao Administrative Council (HHAC) and two other HHAC representatives; Mr. Huynh Nhu Chau and Mr. Ngo Tien, the two Vice Chairmen of the An Giang Committee for Religious and Ethnic Minority Affairs; and Mr. Lu Hy, Vice Chairman of the An Giang Fatherland Front. PolOff visited Hoa Hao dissident Mr. Bui Van Do, a nephew of the Hoa Hao founder, and attempted to meet with Mr. Nam Liem, the tree-climbing Hoa Hao monk (ref A). PolOff also visited three Cham Muslim mosques close to the Cambodian border (ref B).

3. (SBU) The government recognized HHAC reported no problems dealing with the Government of Vietnam, and denied reports from activist groups that the GVN had somehow discouraged followers from attending the religion's two annual festivals in An Giang. Activist Bui Van Do acknowledged that while he was unhappy with the HHAC, he had suffered no major harassment in recent years. HHAC representatives said they were proceeding with plans to hold a General Congress in the second quarter of 2004, the second such meeting since their 1999 official recognition by the GVN. One of the primary purposes of the Congress would be to elect the Hoa Hao leadership for the next five years. HHAC Vice Chairman Dat would not answer specific questions on who was eligible to stand for election, but said the HHAC had not yet conducted a survey of its eleven members to see who would stay and who would resign. While activist Bui Van Do and leaders of some "dissident" Hoa Hao groups in HCMC and the U.S. claimed that all candidates were pre-selected by the GVN and free elections were therefore impossible, the Committee for Ethnic Minority and Religious Affairs denied any role in selecting candidates. (Note: Disaffected Hoa Hao groups contend that nine of the 11 members of the HHAC are also CPV members. End Note.)

4. (SBU) In each of his official meetings, PolOff raised the case of Mr. Nguyen Van Lia, a 63-year-old Hoa Hao Buddhist who had been sentenced to three years in prison for holding a ceremony in June 2003 to commemorate the disappearance of the Hoa Hao founder. HHAC Vice Chairman Dat said that Lia had held an "extreme" celebration, hanging banners "encouraging separation," and causing a "social disturbance." (Note: According to Hoa Hao dissident groups, Lia had raised the pre-1975 Hoa Hao flag.) Religious Affairs Vice Chairman Chau defined a social disturbance as, "when you gather a group in public." He was certain that the banners had contained anti-government slogans, but could not remember the exact wording. He said no pictures had been taken of the controversial event, and nothing had been documented. Late in the conversation, he suddenly remembered that Lia had also "assaulted" security forces, but could not provide details. He also noted that Lia's children had signed "confessions" at the time.

5. (SBU) The two Vice Chairmen for Ethnic Minority and Religious Affairs told PolOff that two additional religious groups in the province, "Tu An Hieu Nghia" and "Buu Son Ky Huong," had started the process to request GVN recognition. Tu An Hieu Nghia (literally "Four Debts of Gratitude") lists roughly 41,000 followers, 226 leaders, and eight places of worship, according to a recent provincial survey. As of late January 2004, their application had cleared the provincial-level process and been forwarded to Hanoi for central government consideration. Buu Son Ky Huong (literally "Strange Fragrance from Precious Mountain"), the Buddhist offshoot that was a direct precursor of Hoa Hao, has 21,000 followers and 28 pagodas, by the official count. Their application is still under consideration at the provincial level.

16. (SBU) En route back to HCMC, PolOff attempted to visit the village of activist Hoa Hao monk Nam Liem. Nam Liem has had several run ins with local officials over the past few years involving displays of "illegal" Hoa Hao regalia and "illegal construction". Each time he has shimmied up a nearby coconut tree and stayed there for days, threatening to immolate himself before eventually being talked down. ConGenoffs have been unsuccessful in their efforts to visit him for the last three years. On this attempt, security officials on motorbikes raced ahead in the direction of Nam Liem's home after questioning individuals who had provided directions to the ConGen driver. A few minutes later, PolOffO found the main road blocked by a truck parked diagonally across it. Further down the road, an "accident" blocked all automobile traffic from proceeding any further. A small truck with a motorbike on the ground in front of it blocked one lane, while a farm vehicle perpendicular to the truck blocked the other lane. A gap between the vehicles was exactly large enough for motorbike traffic to pass unimpeded. The vehicles had no visible signs of damage. While police told PolOff JO that one driver had been taken to the hospital, and the other two drivers had run away, the scene had all the hallmarks of a staged accident. After spending an additional ten minutes trying to measure the space between the "crashed" vehicles to see if the ConGen car could maneuver through without disturbing the "scene of the crime", PolOff gave up and left.

17. (SBU) COMMENT: As has been our experience on many provincial trips, PolOff was "required" to meet an official escort before traveling to the Hoa Hao Holy Land and was under obvious surveillance by a plainclothes officer on a motorbike after leaving the HHAC meeting. Staff members from the provincial People's Committee and External Relations Office also insisted on attending the meeting with the HHAC. The HHAC used part of its meeting to criticize the USG policy on catfish (a major industry in An Giang Province) and attack the International Religious Freedom Report -- in terms identical to those used by GVN officials. Vice Chairman Dat, however, admitted that he had not actually read the report. (Note: PolOff provided Dat with an English-language version of the 2003 report at the end of the meeting.)
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